

Afterlife

★★★★★

By **Donald Antrim**. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, \$20.

This is not your typical memoir: Each of Antrim's stylistically unconventional essays, originally published in *The New Yorker*, revolves around an image or object that spurs memories of his dysfunctional family: a landscape painting, an expensive bed on which Antrim is unable to sleep because he's convinced it's "alive with my mother... pulling me down into the bed to die with her."

His alcoholic mother, Louanne, was both anchor and burden to her family, forever drawing them to her and pushing them away, even to the extent of twice marrying and divorcing Antrim's father. The book is lush with the details of how alcoholism and other dysfunctions (e.g., depression, affairs) leave their imprint on families. "Grandiose hopes and dreams" were, Antrim writes, "the story of my alcoholic family."

As Antrim self-deprecatingly examines how the past affects his present, the scenes with Louanne's blackouts, guilt trips and assertions of her artistic merit (as an avant-garde seamstress) emerge as the most engaging, even while the spine chills at her misguided "image of herself as a heroine on a journey."

Antrim's storytelling skills are undeniable: He ripples outward from themes into darkly humorous insights on kin, work and addiction, always returning to his premise with heavier baggage.

The patchwork chronology provides no distinct time line as a guide, and the order of events is perplexing; readers are obliged to piece together the puzzle of Antrim's life themselves. Yet what the chapters lack in narrative momentum, they make up in thoughtful, cynical, deeply felt revelations.
—*Gretchen Kalwinski*

Sex, Blood and Rock 'n' Roll

★★★★★

By **Kimberly Warner-Cohen**. Ig Publishing, \$13.95.

Apparently a novel about a young woman who stumbles into work as a dominatrix, becomes pregnant, is attacked by a client and loses the baby wasn't enough for Kimberly Warner-Cohen. Playing on stereotypes about childhood sexual abuse and man-hating sex workers, Warner-Cohen gave her main character, Cassie, a double life as a serial killer.

Cassie Chambers, edgy punk princess, divides her time between her day job of humiliating men for money; going clubbing; her live-in boyfriend, Dev; and the occasional murder of unsuspecting men. The portions of the narrative where she's learning the S&M trade, interacting with creepy clients, or just hanging out with her friends are the most energetic and interesting. The casually penciled-in scenes of slaughter and mayhem are incongruous, with painful dialogue ("Why does my side hurt?" "Because I stabbed you") and faux-crazy inner monologues ("Stay in bed a little while

longer, missing the bleeding aftermath. Figured out early on that *Penthouse* Forum doesn't write about eviscerating your ideal man.")

It is implied that Cassie murders men as revenge for all the wrongs inflicted upon her at their hands. Warner-Cohen never asks us to feel sorry for Cassie or to understand her choices, but she is presented as a victim, despite dominating men for a living. Unlike Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*, we are given personal reasons for Cassie's horrors, and we see her very much enjoying what she is doing. The leap between the controlled violence of S&M and the murders is too quick and obvious.

The book reads like stage directions ("Step onto sidewalk and want to lean against the building"), but the scenes where Cassie plies her trade are spot-on. Warner-Cohen has the banalities down: cleaning everything a client touches with alcohol, locker-room banter, the sameness of it all. Unfortunately, that detail and voice are soon drowned out by the murder plot, never to be heard from again.—*Beth Dugan*

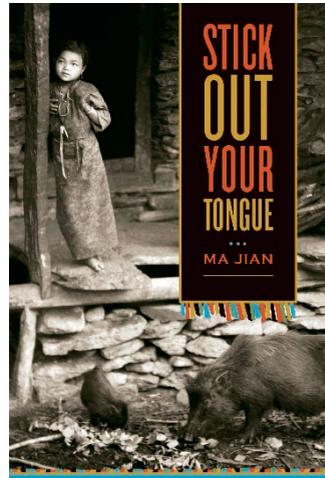
Stick Out Your Tongue

★★★★★

By **Ma Jian**. Translated by **Flora Drew**. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, \$16.

In 1987, the five stories of *Stick Out Your Tongue* made their debut in a small Chinese literary journal and were immediately outlawed by the Chinese government. Jian's writing was deemed "vulgar" and "obscene," and he was charged with representing an "image of Tibet... that has nothing to do with reality." While the threat of imprisonment forced him into exile, black-market copies of the stories circulated, and Jian became famous as both writer and dissident.

Nearly 20 years later, Flora Drew's English translation provides Western readers with a disturbing and unsentimental vision of Chinese-occupied Tibet. An unnamed Chinese narrator, traveling alone in search of redemption and religious awakening, instead encounters the suffering of the impoverished Tibetan peasantry. In his journey, he bears witness to an assortment of horrors inflicted with the holiness that lingers in the open air and grasslands of the Tibetan plateau. He attends a Buddhist "sky burial," in which a soldier's dead lover is dismembered and fed to vultures. He speaks to an old peasant in search of his abandoned daughter, who is the child of an incestuous affair. Later, he meets a man who has hung his ex-lover's dried skin on the wall of his home. Rather than paradise, this Tibet is a land of politics, suffering and nightmare,



where love and spirituality have both lost the power to heal.

Jian's mysterious scenes bear little resemblance to the typical American short story, but there is far too much craftsmanship at work for them to be labeled mere vignettes. Rather, they are complex glimpses of confused and isolated people bound together by an abiding faith in religion, no matter the circumstances. And while the subject matter may sound gruesome or even sensationalist, the flat-out emotional power of this slim book is tremendous. Experiencing the hard and unexpected reality of Jian's Tibet will leave you taxed and full of questions, but also amazed.—*Patrick Somerville*

Listings

If you want to be listed

Submit information by mail, e-mail (books@timeoutchicago.com) or fax (312-924-9350) to **Jonathan Messinger**. Include details, dates, times, address of venue with cross streets, nearest El station or bus routes, contact information and admission price, if any. **Deadline is 6pm on Thursday, two weeks before publication date.** Incomplete submissions will not be included, and listings information will not be accepted over the phone. Listings are free but, as space is limited, inclusion is not guaranteed.

* Recommended or notable

Thursday 1

FREE Jonathan Alter *Borders Books & Music*, 1500 16th St. Oak Brook (630-574-0800). 7:30pm. The *Newsweek* senior editor explores the first 100 days of FDR's presidency in his new book, *The Defining Moment*. It's an interesting idea, calling the first 100 days of FDR's tenure the defining moment, since he then went on to spend more days in office than any other President.

FREE Colin Beavan *Undisclosed* downtown location, call the Book Stall for info (847-446-8880). 11:30am. Beavan's *Operation Jedburgh* tells, for the first time, the true story of American espionage in France during WWII, including where it was effective and where it wasn't.

FREE Cheryl Booth *Transitions* Bookplace, 1000 W North Ave at Sheffield Ave (312-951-7323). El: Red to North/Clybourn. Bus: 8 Halsted, 72 North. 7pm. When Booth's little brother died, she felt that he never left her. Since then, she's claimed to be able to act as a medium for her bro, as well as do readings for clients. Of course, this comes with all of the caveats you'd expect from mediums. She'll discuss her new book, *Johnny Angel Is My Brother: A Psychic Medium's Journey*.

The Boy Detective Fails *Viaduct Theater*, 3111 N Western Ave at Barry Ave (773-296-6024). Bus: 49 (24 hrs), X49, 77 (24 hrs), 8pm, \$15-\$19. Local novelist-playwright **Joe Meno** and director **Nathan Allen** team up for this moody piece about the former child-prodigy detective Billy Argo's failure to thrive. While the zaniness of several recurring subplots gets a little wearying, underlying them all is a bass line of existential dread, which surfaces as Argo searches after the secret that drove his sister to suicide. The House's production displays a seemingly inexhaustible visual flair, and thematically seems to be slouching toward adulthood.

Drinking & Writing Volume III: To Cure a Hangover *Hopleaf*, 5148 N Clark St at Winona St (773-334-9851). El: Red to Berwyn. Bus: 22 Clark (24 hrs), 92 Foster. 7pm, \$10. As part of the monthlong Drinking and Writing Brewery's Festivus Veisalgia, **Sean Benjamin** and **Steve Mosqueda's** play looks at how writers have dealt with hangovers, while drinking along with the audience.

FREE Mark Lamster *The Book Stall*, 811 Elm St, *Winnetha* (847-446-8880). *Metra: Union Pacific N to Winnetha*. 7pm. In the early 20th century, Albert Spalding decided to go on a marketing mission and travel the globe, spreading the news that baseball was the true savior. Lamster's *Spalding World Tour* paints him as a driven man with a flair for marketing stunts.

FREE Leslie Mass *Seminary Co-Op Bookstore*, 5757 S University Ave at 58th St (773-752-4381). El: Red, Green to Garfield, then bus: 55 Garfield (24 hrs). *Metra: Elec Main to 57th St*. 7pm. Mass did at 60 what most of us would never do in the prime of our lives: hiked the Appalachian Trail. She tells her story in her new book, *In Beauty May She Walk*.